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Violeta Parra's Contribution to the 1960s Art Scene

LORNA DILLON

The turbulence of Violeta Parra's career has been clearly delineated in the preceding chapters. A pattern emerges in the analyses of her early struggles as a singer and folklorist and of her later success as an artist on the international stage: she was more successful abroad than she was in her home country. This was particularly the case with regard to her visual art. In chapter 7 Yalkin's analysis of Parra's most famous exhibition in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris gives a clear sense of the reception of her art in Europe. In this chapter I will continue the focus on Parra's visual art, seeking to explore the reasons why it was so successful abroad. I view Parra within the European art scene of the 1960s and consider the relationship between her art and that of other leading artists of the time.

Without a doubt, Parra's artistic masterpieces are her *arpilleras* (embroideries). One of these, emblematic of Parra's bold, activist style, is entitled *Contra la guerra* (Against War) (1964). It is a work of art which absolutely epitomises its era. The medium (cloth with wool embroidered on to it) is anti-intellectual and the pacifist message it presents brings politics into art in the era of the Cold War. In this, as in her other embroideries and sculptures, Parra was challenging the supremacy of the canvas by presenting radical ideas through undervalued and unorthodox media. In Europe at this time there was an 'anti-movement' formed of Abstractionists, New Realists, Assemblers and Pop artists.¹ I propose that the agency of Parra's art was instrumental in this anti-movement. To demonstrate this, I will show that visually and conceptually her work was at the forefront of the artistic avant-garde. I relate Parra's work to what scholars like Bourdieu describe as being 'in the air'.² This endeavour is problematic because it involves recreating the less tangible aspects of an era:

¹ Will Grohmann and Sam Hunter (eds), *New Art around the World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), 9.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 32.

One of the major difficulties of the social history of philosophy, art or literature is that it has to reconstruct these spaces of original possibilities which, because they were part of the self-evident givens of the situation, remained unremarked and are therefore unlikely to be mentioned in contemporary accounts, chronicles or memoirs.³

I will look at the way her work resonates with (and to a certain extent prefigures) a key movement in modern art: Neo-Dadaism. Parra was a Chilean artist; however, her work was not well received in Chile. I suggest that this was due to a political bias in the Latin American art world of the 1960s. In this chapter, I will explore the context for this political bias and links between Parra's art and the art work being produced in Europe at the time.

Contra la guerra, like Parra's other embroideries, exemplifies the edge of experimental art in the 1960s. In Latin America at this time there was an ideological battle being fought in the art world: abstract art was strongly promoted as a way of countering more figurative, socially engaged art. In the United States there was a 'turn from public art to abstract expressionism, from a politicized avant-garde to a depoliticized avant-garde art';⁴ and some scholars consider the US promotion of non-representational art in Latin America as part of a wider political agenda. According to Andrea Giunta, for example, citing Néstor García Canelini's work, the advancement of abstract art must be linked to an 'institutional network established by the internationalist project (the International Council of the MOMA, the Pan-American Union, the CIA, and transnational corporations);⁵ whose aim was to 'difundir una experimentación formal aparentemente despolitizada, sobre todo el expresionismo abstracto, como alternativo al realismo social, el muralismo y toda corriente preocupada por la identidad nacional de nuestro países' (to disseminate a formal experiment that was supposedly depoliticised, offering abstract expressionism as an alternative to social realism, to muralism and to the wave of art concerned with national identity in our countries).⁶

This agenda was backed by financial policies that supported certain types of exhibitions and can be read as a strategy of oppression:

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Jean Franco, *The Decline & Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

⁵ Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.

⁶ Néstor García Canelini, *La producción simbólica teoría método en sociología del arte* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1979), 106.

I sustain that the support given by a group of North American institutions to Latin American Art should be also understood as a propaganda instrument oriented towards countering Cuban policies towards Latin American intellectuals. These intellectuals were constantly convened in Havana to discuss the culture of the revolution and their conclusions were reprinted in leftist intellectual magazines across the continent.⁷

Despite such machinations, socially and politically engaged art is a constant in the Latin American scene, as Valerie Fraser explains: 'life and art are too closely bound up, the experience of reality too urgent and omnipresent to be ignored or avoided or wished away'.⁸

In the introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu, Randal Johnson introduces the idea that there is a symbiotic relationship between culture and social structures:

Unequal power relations, unrecognized as such and thus accepted as legitimate, are embedded in the systems of classification used to describe and discuss everyday life – and in the ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society.⁹

I view the ideological manipulation of cultural infrastructure as one of the factors which shaped the poor reception of Parra's work in Chile. The disdain for Parra's art, which is documented in the other chapters of this book as well as in previous early studies by Isabel Parra¹⁰ and José María Arguedas et al.,¹¹ must be considered alongside the way financial support for Latin American institutions was used as a way of controlling dissent and countering the dissemination of left-wing, ideologically motivated views. Bourdieu delineates the relationship between success and socio-political context as follows:

The *space of literary or artistic position-takings*, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field – literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc. – is inseparable from the *space of literary or artistic positions* defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific

⁷ Giunta, *Avant-Garde*, 13.

⁸ Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America* (London: Verso, 1989), 12.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 2.

¹⁰ Isabel Parra, *El libro mayor de Violeta Parra* (Madrid: Ediciones Michay, 1985), 10.

¹¹ José María Arguedas et al., 'Análisis de un genio popular hacen artistas y escritores: Violeta Parra,' *Revista de educación* (December 1968), 68.

capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital.¹²

While Bourdieu does not expressly mention financial assistance to galleries and other cultural organisations, it is, I believe, implicit in the terms 'political acts' and 'polemics'. Given the abstract-versus-figurative polemic, it is no surprise that Parra's art was ill-received in Chile and that only when she crossed the Atlantic would she garner institutional support and a receptive audience.

As well as being situated within this figurative-versus-abstract, political-versus-apolitical polemic that marked Latin American art in the mid-twentieth century, Parra's art was part of a new vision for art that was emerging using media that had previously been disregarded. In many ways Parra's art was at the forefront of trends to champion these prosaic media. It anticipated the art quilt movement, which would take hold of the United States in the late 1960s, and it engaged with the salient concerns of artists worldwide. According to Andrea Giunta, these were

The need to eliminate the barriers between art and life, to fuse art and politics, to express anti-intellectualism, anti-institutionalism, to redesign and broaden the traditional concept of the 'work of art' (happenings, collages, assemblages), to search for a new public, all of these were recurring features in the culture of the decade.¹³

What we find in the heterogeneity of Parra's *oeuvre* is a multiple recasting of these philosophical issues.

By using everyday materials like fabric, which she made into throws, and newspaper, which she made into papier-mâché, Parra questioned the artificial distinction between art objects and utilitarian pieces, blurring the boundary between art objects and everyday life. This was a political statement in an era when paintings were associated with what Cecilia Valdés Urrutia has called the official institutions of capitalism.¹⁴ Valdés Urrutia is referring to museums, galleries and the art establishment. Partly due to this radicalism, Parra's art was not well received in Chile during her lifetime. Catherine Boyle outlines other, practical reasons for this later in this book in her chapter on the cultural venue Parra established in Santiago, La Carpa de la Reina. However, even prior to the establishment of La Carpa, Parra had exhibited her art in the country with

limited success. In December 1960 she exhibited at the Feria de Artes Plásticas, a key event in the Chilean arts, which was held in Parque Forestal, Santiago. The Feria itself was a great success: 'Produjo una euforia colectiva. Más de 700,000 personas admiraron en el Parque Forestal las obras de Camilo Mori y los primeros intentos de instalación que concibió Francisco Brugnoli'. (It generated collective euphoria. Over 700,000 people admired the works of Camilo Mori and Francisco Brugnoli's first attempts at installations.)¹⁵ This fervour did not extend to Parra's stall. The Chilean public was uncomfortable with her vision, as the painter Martínez Bonatti recalled in a round table discussion:

Quando hace años los tapices de Violeta Parra colgaban en la primera Feria de Artes Plásticas nosotros pasamos de largo y no fuimos capaces de participar de ellos, de querer tener esas cosas. Ahora todos queremos tener un tapiz de Violeta Parra.¹⁶

(When, years ago, Violeta Parra's embroideries hung in the first Visual Art Fair we gave them a wide berth and we were not able to participate in them, to want to have these things. Now we all want to have one of Violeta Parra's embroideries.)

There are many reasons for the derision that Parra's art met in Chile. These range from widespread prejudice against folk culture to elitism and an ideologically motivated institutional bias in the Chilean arts. If the Feria de Artes Plásticas was pioneering, and there was a global trend to move away from the hegemony of painting, oil on canvas nonetheless remained the medium of choice: 'En Chile la pintura y el museo concitan el máximo reconocimiento y favorable'. (In Chile painting and museums are highly regarded and conditions favorable.) (In Chile painting and museums are highly regarded and conditions have always been favourable for the perpetuation of the medium of painting.)¹⁷ By delineating this context, I seek to trace the relationship between Parra's success and, to borrow Bourdieu's elucidation, the 'structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field'.¹⁸

In 1959 a new era was marked in the arts when the first Biennale of Young Artists opened in Paris. It included works by Yves Klein, Frederick Hundertwasser, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Jean Tinguely. The same year, the small collage that is regarded as the first Pop Art work was shown at the Institute of

¹² Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 30.

¹³ Giunta, *Avant-Garde*, 2.

¹⁴ Cecilia Valdés Urrutia (ed.), *Pintura en Chile 1950–2005: grandes temas* (Santiago: Morgan Impresores, 2006), 17.

¹⁵ Ricardo Bindis, *Pintura chilena doscientos años* (Santiago: Origo Ediciones, 2006), 306.

¹⁶ Arguedas et al., 'Análisis de un genio', 68.

¹⁷ Valdés Urrutia (ed.), *Pintura en Chile 1950–2005*, 17.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 30.

Contemporary Arts in London.¹⁹ This was a time when Neo-Dadaism was 'the most talked about art movement',²⁰ in London collage methods became publicly fashionable around 1960 or 1961²¹ and in Paris at around the same time the artists Hains, Tinguely, Klein, Daniel Spoerri, Arman, Villeglé and Dufréne formed the *Nouveau Réalisme* movement. These disparate movements favoured reality rather than abstract painting and sought to include real items in their creations. United by a disbelief in the omnipotence of the oil painting, each of the movements posed, in its own way, the fundamental question of the 1960s art world: 'what is art?' It was within this intellectual context, in 1964, the year that Robert Rauschenberg received first prize at the Venice Biennale, that Parra held her solo exhibition in the Louvre. Parra's exhibition worked the same seams as Rauschenberg's, with both artists voicing an interrogatory exploration of the nature of art. Intellectually and visually the media that Parra employed were on the cusp of modern thought. While she was producing textile art on scraps of second-hand material, Rauschenberg, the most renowned of the Neo-Dadaists, 'began to load canvases with tatters of cloth, reproductions, comic-strip fragments, and other collage elements of waste and discarded materials of a Dadaist density'.²² A few years later, when Parra was mixing newspaper and magazine strips with paint in her papier-mâché works, Rauschenberg was blending magazine photographs and drawings with watercolour paint. Rauschenberg's montage of disparate materials (*Canyon* (1959), for example, meshes paint with pencil, paper, fabric, metal, buttons, nails, cardboard, printed paper, photographs, wood, paint tubes, mirror, string, a pillow and an eagle. Rauschenberg himself coined the term 'combine' for this type of work, as he explained in a panel discussion in 1966:

I had to coin that word because I got so bored with arguments. I was interested in people seeing my work. When someone would come up and I really wanted to know what they thought of it or wanted to sense the exposure, there was always this screen that they could get behind which was, if I said it is painting, they would say that's not painting, its sculpture [...]. the word 'combine' really refers to those things that somehow exceed the traditional or the former definition of a painting.²³

¹⁹ I refer here to Richard Hamilton's small collage, *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?* (1956), originally a maquette for the 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow* and widely regarded as the first Pop Art work.

²⁰ Irving Sandler, 'Ash Can Revisited: A New York Letter', *Art International* 4.8 (25 October 1960), 28.

²¹ Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 167.

²² Grohmann and Hunter (eds), *New Art*, 29.

²³ Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (London: Bowker, 1985), 153.

The term Neo-Dadaism refers to the 'creative efforts of numerous artists now associated with different and much more limiting labels – labels that virtually preclude their works being considered together'.²⁴ It first appeared in *Artnews* to describe the artistic trends of the time²⁵ and grew out of the intellectual resonance of Dadaism, a global trend to present manufactured items as works of art that stemmed from Marcel Duchamp's idea that 'common non-art objects could be extracted from daily use for aesthetic ends'.²⁶ Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* (1917) is made from a urinal. It was removed from an exhibition held by the New York Society of Independent Artists in 1917,²⁷ the year that he first submitted it, but was widely exhibited in the form of reproductions several decades later, and remains one of the best-known works of the twentieth century. *Fountain* was based on the premise that the artistic experience is not simply one of viewing but of cognitive engagement. Parra's work is a far cry from Duchamp's urinal, but the intellectual premise of *Fountain* was gaining traction in the 1950s and 1960s (hence the reproductions) and it generated an artistic genealogy in the intellectual sensibility to everyday items. Indeed the fruit of Duchamp's 'readymades' 'had their full impact on other artists only after 1955'.²⁸ At that time, Parra was among a number of artists who employed everyday items, known as found materials, in their works of art and, broadly speaking, this became known (among other things) as Neo-Dadaism. The term referred to two traits of the earlier Dada movement:

First there was a Dada-like sense of paradox and ambiguity embodied in [Jasper] Johns's paintings of targets, numbers and maps [...]. Second, there was a connection to Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, and other Dada artists in Rauschenberg's use of junk and found objects to create 'combines', hybrid painting sculptures.²⁹

Perhaps due to the politically weighted associations of abstraction, Parra's art avoids ambiguity in the sense evoked by the *Artnews* elicitation; however, the other hallmarks of Neo-Dadaism – paradox and the use of found objects in 'combines'

²⁴ Serena Rattazzi, 'Acknowledgements', in Susan Hapgood, *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958–62* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1994), 7.

²⁵ This information is from Susan Hapgood's book *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958–62*. The original text can be found in *Artnews* 58.9 (January 1958), 1, 5.

²⁶ Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 29.

²⁷ Reports vary as to whether *Fountain* was actually removed from the exhibition or simply removed from sight. Either way the issues it raised were to become a sensation in the art world.

²⁸ Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s*, 31.

²⁹ Robert Atkins, *Art Speak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 128.

— are prominent features of her praxis. Parra's collage work tends to be dated between 1963 and 1965, concurrent with Neo-Dadaism and *Nonreun Rêdisme*. Her use of newspaper, in particular, exemplifies the application of real items in works of art. The everyday newspaper is removed from its original context as a disposable artefact and transformed into a medium that can rival paint and plaster. Parra's experimentation with papier-mâché typifies this widespread fascination with the category of the discarded and the trend to destabilise the sovereignty of oil on canvas. Using paper to create collages was not new. Taylor writes that for most of the twentieth century 'the technique of pasted paper had a special and even profound part to play in the expression of modern sensibility: a sensibility attuned to matter in the modern city, matter under the regime of capital';³⁰ but collage, he maintains, was to become particularly hip in the 1960s at around the same time that meta-discourses were making all aspects of the arts:

Everyday material culture was rich in pieces of paper and their competitive juxtaposition; hence it was primarily through collage that the artist could maintain a relationship to commercial modernity that was philosophical and social in the broadest meaning of those ill-fated terms: sometimes satirical and parodic, but also reflective, aesthetic and above all experiential. And cutting and gluing belonged in this world as ordinary domestic skills.³¹

Parra's hybrid papier-mâché and paint sculpture (or 'combine', if we use the term that would be used for one of Rauschenberg's works) *Genocidio* (Genocide) (1963–65) fuses paint and papier-mâché on a background of plywood. As the title suggests, the image depicts a scene of genocide. To the right of the composition is a group of armed soldiers and facing them, to the left, is an inverted body, in the process of being hurled upon a pile of corpses by another soldier. Parra has used what appears to be expensive green oil paint to present the military forces, while the people who are being killed are presented using the disposable medium of newspaper. The heads are sculpted from papier-mâché with the facial features moulded out of magazines. In some ways this sculpted composition opposes the qualities of order, proportion, balance and harmony that are found in classical art, yet Parra's work is interesting because, unlike many of the 'combines', it presents a dissident aesthetic within balanced and clearly delineated forms. The formal qualities of Parra's papier-mâché sculptures also reveal tendencies that were greatly in vogue. Eva Hesse was working in Germany on similarly constructed designs as was Lourdes Castro in Portugal; and in 1962 the Argentine artist Alberto Giacometti, known for his rustic sculptures, won first prize at the Venice

Biennale. The contours of Parra's papier-mâché compositions, created just a year or two later, have great affinities with Giacometti's sculptures. There was something exciting and modern about this coarse anti-art aesthetic.

The papier-mâché in *Genocidio* is atypical of her collages because one of the scraps of paper in this image contains a photographic representation of a face. It has been taken from a glossy magazine and applied over a sphere of papier-mâché about the size of a golf ball. There is something of the uncanny in this; indeed, my own reaction to this realistic yet doll-like image was one of horror. As a spectator we are distanced from the reality of the genocide scene by the naive manner in which Parra has painted it. The realism of the photo, however, ruptures the level of detachment facilitated by the papier-mâché, creating a sense of unease that is eminently disturbing. The flat blocks of green paint that present the profile of the armed officials contrasts with the three-dimensionality of the papier-mâché bodies. This juxtaposition is one of the primary ways in which the piece communicates. It is this visual syntax that links Parra to Rauschenberg, one of the first artists to be designated Neo-Dadaist.³² In *Genocidio*, the paradox is nuanced through the inclusion of small found objects amid the massacre scene. Although the textual element of the papier-mâché is, for the most part, blurred, there is one piece of ephemera in particular on which writing is legible. Analogous in colour with the red hue that surrounds it and strikingly different from the rest of the image, the fragment, which delineates a limb of the inverted body in the composition, has the unmistakable aspect of manufactured packaging. The writing on it is truncated but we can just about distinguish the letters 'elzucker', which contrast visually and textually with the surrounding design, creating an edgy juxtaposition. This contrast in textures creates a tension that works well with the tone of the scene of genocide being depicted. It also affords the spectator some relief from the darkness of the issue in hand: protestors being slaughtered by armed forces. This distancing is typical of European Pop Art of the era:

Although it would be simplistic to say that the [North] American artists glorified the new consumer culture, they can neither be regarded as politically engaged critics of the 'American way of life.' [...] The European Pop artists, on the other hand, were far more outspoken in their critique of the brave new world of modern technology and mass-media culture. Their transformation of popular imagery involved devices that were similar to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.³³

³² Hapgood, *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958–62*, 12.

³³ Günter Berghaus, 'Happenings in Europe in the 60s: Trends, Events and Leading Figures', *The Drama Review* 37.4 (1993), 159.

³⁰ Taylor, *Collage*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Like its Dadaist forerunners, Parra's Neo-Dadaist collage is protest art at its most acute. In her study of collage, Alejandra Morales maintains that Dadaist collage was a protest against society, the war, high art and objects as merchandise. She notes that this kind of art sought to burst the bubble of all its artistic forerunners.³⁴ Neo-Dadaist collage and indeed Parra's collage *Genocidio* can be read in similar terms. The cognitive suggestions that arise from the inclusion of a tangible, existent item in a visual composition are infinite. The word *zucker* means sugar in German, and thus the fragment with the bold typeface of a mass-produced brand, possibly a sugar wrapper, connects the fetishisation of products and labels that accompanies the marketing of mass-produced goods under capitalism. This strategy of undermining consumerism and the rhetoric of mass media permeates much of Parra's art. It is superbly nuanced in *Hombre con reloj* (Man with a Watch) (n.d.), a composition that depicts a man posing as if he were a model in typical advertising style, wearing a glittery, diamond-encrusted watch. The man's legs are made up of magazine fragments and his arm is outstretched in a pose that recalls *The Creation of Adam* (circa 1512) in Michelangelo's famous Renaissance fresco. Also included in *Hombre con reloj* is the Wilkinson Sword logo, a quintessentially masculine brand that Parra deftly inserts, creating humour based on the absurdity of advertising campaigns. By including recognisable advertising imagery within a composition that recalls one of the most renowned of the Renaissance frescoes, Parra undermines the authority of iconographic systems old and new.

The inclusion of the possible sugar wrapper in *Genocidio* also questions our notion of art. Like the use of sackcloth and wool in *Contra la guerra*, the use of what appears to be part of a sugar wrapper or some other scrap from the detritus of modern culture undermines the authority of high art. As Morales explains, 'bajo la postura política y destructiva de transformar la realidad social a través de las formas artísticas, el collage intentó desactivar los principios que definían cómo debe ser y verse el arte' (beneath the destructive and political stance of transforming social reality through artistic forms, collage sought to undermine the principles that defined how art should be and be seen).³⁵ This is one of the points that collages like this seek to highlight. The inclusion of this apparent logo within a scene of genocide also suggests a link between the realm of the multinational company and the atrocity being depicted, between business and repression, capitalism and human rights abuses. Indeed, the incorporation of consumer waste into Parra's art elicits a

commentary on the nature of consumer culture and the nature of art, thus situating the papier-mâché sculpture within the domain of Pop Art.

The term Pop Art first appeared in print in an article by the British critic Lawrence Alloway, 'The Arts and the Mass Media', published in the February 1958 issue of *Architectural Design*.³⁶ Several journals ran stories on it in 1962³⁷ although it began to appear in exhibitions in the mid-1950s, with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. In the USA, Pop Art was initially regarded as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism because its exponents employed figurative imagery. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue for *This is Tomorrow*, Alloway speaks of the play with signs and the wide range of materials and structures in the exhibitions.³⁸ The exhibition brought forth the idea that the new spectator would have to actively participate in the artistic process, as Taylor explains:

The new spectator would not be able to rely upon 'learned responses' called up by a picture in a frame, a single house in a street, or a univocal text upon a page, but would have to take on responsibility for flexible and mutually inconsistent interpretations of contrasting messages consisting of both text, object and image amounting so something like a 'new contract' for the aesthetic exchanges which were to come.³⁹

All of Parra's papier-mâché sculptures seem to have this linguistic process in mind. *La niña y el arpa* (The Girl and the Harp) (1963–65), for example, measures 45 cm by 80 cm, and by standing a couple of metres away the spectator can appreciate the overall composition of a musician playing the harp and the play of light on the contours of the sculpture. The news script is partly legible, compelling the spectator to approach the composition, and tantalisingly suggesting that further meanings could be unlocked by close scrutiny. The spectator who examines the image closely is rewarded with amusing details: on the frame of the harp, for example, a scrap of paper taken from a comic strip contains a pair of legs and a speech bubble. This inclusion of commonplace signs from a comic strip, typical of Pop Art syntax, debunks the pomposity of the art world in classic Neo-Dadaist style. Another playful hallmark of Pop Art appears in another collage, *La Cueca* (The Cueca) (1963–65): a pair of lips. This symbol, virtually synonymous with the Pop Art movement, is one

³⁶ Lawrence Alloway, 'The Arts and the Mass Media', *Architectural Design* (February 1958), 84–5.

³⁷ Atkins, *Art Speak*, 148.

³⁸ Lawrence Alloway, *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue (1956), unpag.

³⁹ Taylor, *Collage*, 160.

³⁴ Alejandra Morales, 'El collage: una clave de ingreso en la visualidad del siglo xx', MA dissertation, Universidad de Chile, 2005, 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 10.

of the clearest scraps used in the composition. Appearing on the ephemera used to depict the girl's shoulder, it is one of the few examples of Parra's use of pictorial signs within the picture. Another example of the incorporation of this type of sign, a self-referential signifier, is the scrap of paper used to depict a handkerchief. It appears to reference the handkerchief and also itself (a page from a magazine). It differs from most of the other fragments used in the work as it is glossy and coloured. In fact, the photographic and textual elements are so clear that it appears as if the girl in the image is holding an actual page from a newspaper or magazine. A similar direct denotation is elicited by the wristwatch in *Homme con reloj*. It retains its original meaning as a sign for a watch, but with an ironic twist, since it does not sit across the wrist, but rather forms the entire arm of the man being depicted. This pictorial irony poses a number of reflexive questions about the visual idiom. Parra's fusion of supersized photographs, speech bubbles and sculpted shapes presents us with a play on the nature of the sign. This partnership of image and text is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. As Roland Barthes observes, 'all images are polysemous; they imply underlying their signifiers, a floating chain of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others'.⁴⁰ Although Barthes is referring to readers, the quotation is applicable to the plastic arts. Barthes's writing is especially pertinent to Parra's papier-mâché works since the latter combine the poetics of images, music and texts.

This combination of different signifying systems relates to philosophical musings that were particularly in vogue. In their study of Chilean contemporary art, Milan Ivalic and Gaspar Galaz Capechiaci describe the way artists in the 1960s began a process of profound questioning of art practices, which included the ways works of art were produced as well as their visual syntax.⁴¹ Pictures 'become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing they call for a *lexis*',⁴² and so pictures that include text elicit multiple readings. Parra's papier-mâché sculptures compel the spectator to search for meanings by piecing together the diverse visual and textual references. The intellectual pleasure generated by this activity is furthered by the fact that most of the words are incomplete, leaving the viewer to puzzle over the fragments. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin explores the way meanings are generated beyond the literal meanings of words. He coined the term dialogic for the secondary and multiple meanings that can arise from subtexts and from spaces *between* enunciations or as a result of combinations of words. What Bakhtin demonstrates

is the heteroglossia of language.⁴³ Bakhtin's linguistic theory is particularly relevant to collage, where meanings are generated by the collision of signs and the autonomy of the signified is shattered by the juxtaposition of heterogeneous signifiers. It is often said that the *papiers-collé* in particular are the representation of representation. According to Taylor, like language, they are structured by means of 'arbitrary signs "circulating" within a system of opposites'.⁴⁴ This is especially pertinent to Parra's papier-mâché combines, which pose an infinite number of insoluble questions: What is the relationship between the words and the images? Why has Parra used text in French while always reiterating that her art is Chilean? How should we relate the compositions as a whole to the found items and texts within them? There are no fixed answers; essentially, the images catalyse a series of questions in which the viewer is left with multiple interpretative possibilities:

The science of the signifier brings contemporary mythology a second reactivation (or a second enlargement) taken aslant by language, the word is written through and through: signs endlessly deferring their foundations, transforming their signifieds into new signifiers, infinitely citing one another, nowhere to come to a halt.⁴⁵

The power of the papier-mâché sculptures does not lie in the transparency of meaning but in the plethora of possible meanings generated by the interaction between visual and verbal signifiers. This essentially is what makes them so modern, or to be more precise, so postmodern. Unlike classical art, which has a direct mimetic relationship with the object it represents, Parra's papier-mâché sculptures present a kind of internal dialogue, with each fragment of paper and each part of the image generating meaning via the relationship it has with surrounding fragments and scraps of text. With respect to this type of visual syntax, Alejandra Morales deconstructs the signifying process of collage as follows:

La heterogeneidad del collage evita un significado unívoco y estable, pues cada elemento citado rompe la continuidad y linealidad del discurso, permitiendo una doble lectura: del fragmento percibido en relación con su texto de origen y del fragmento percibido en relación con su conjunto, transformando al efecto de oscilación que se produce entre presencia y ausencia.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1990), 39.

⁴¹ Milan Ivalic and Gaspar Galaz Capechiaci, *Chile arte actual* (Valparaíso: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, 2006), 16.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), 110.

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Collage*, 28.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 168.

⁴⁶ Morales, 'El collage', 20.

(The heterogeneity of collage does not lend itself to a single, stable meaning since each element breaks the continuity and the linearity of the discourse, allowing a double reading: of the fragment considered with respect to the original text it was taken from and of the fragment considered with respect to its surroundings; generating an effect of oscillation between presence and absence.)

Despite such polysemy, patterns do emerge from Parra's art. This is true for the individual papier-mâché works as much as it is for Parra's corpus of plastic art as a whole, and indeed for her creativity in a wider sense if we consider her praxis in different genres. The patterns allow us to read her work, and what we find is that she is expressing ideas through the interstices between the signs. Thus on a micro level we can use the relationship between the words and images as a way of interpreting the compositions, and on a macro level, we see the way themes from her songs and poems are translated visually into the works of art. Like Bakhtin's heteroglossia, the nuances of meaning that emerge from Parra's papier-mâché sculptures come from the combination of signs. If we consider the overall language of the papier-mâché sculptures, then the printed script or fragments of it combine with the formal elements to create a visual grammar. These elements are part of a wider semiotic system in which meanings generated by the text can be reiterated or refuted by the image. Parra's collages read like poetry, both in the literal sense and in the wider sense if we consider the works of art on their own and working together. The scraps are written in French, for example, adding a level of biographical and cultural specificity which also works with the personal subjects in some of the compositions: her family and friends, musicians, places she had been to and rituals that she had participated in. The word 'suisse', for example, is printed on the hand in the papier-mâché composition *Violinista* (Violinist), and in numerous compositions French newspaper has been used. This reminds us that our Chilean folklorist was polyglot and well-travelled. At the same time, like a scrapbook, it testifies to the details of Parra's personal experience. Since French is often considered a language of erudition, the use of the French language lends the works of art a cosmopolitan air that distorts the simplicity of the Chilean folk aesthetic and reminds us that they were often intended for a European audience. Thus the detail of the papier-mâché sculptures reiterates the Dadaist anti-art stance that permeates Parra's work as a whole. Likewise, the speech bubble in *La niña y el arpa* has been extracted from a comic strip and stuck into this work of 'high art'. Also in *La niña y el arpa* is an inverted fragment on which the words 'existentialist' and 'movement' are printed. These examples illustrate the binary sign system that Taylor refers to, since the comic strip, a form of low art, is diametrically opposed to the registers in

which the terms *existentialist* and *movement* would be found, criticism or high art. The juxtaposition of these two references from polarised cultural fields engenders a dialogue on the nature of high and low art. Again, this is typical of European Pop Art:

It became a major concern of European Pop artists to create an awareness of the dangers inherent in a popular culture, where the 'real' world is transformed into an image of reality that seems more perfect and desirable than the originary [*sic*] reality.⁴⁷

In this chapter I have explored the intellectual position of Parra's art with respect to a key artistic movement of the 1960s, Neo-Dadaism. Neo-Dadaism was an anti-intellectual movement which sought to break the barriers between art and life, art and politics. Artists worldwide were concerned with these ideas in an era when painting was strongly associated with the institutions of capitalism, and the promotion of abstract art in Latin America was a way of countering the socially engaged styles of muralism and socially realist art. Parra's employment of radical media within this context was a way to offset the supremacy of oil on canvases. Her visual activism occupies a position in this wider, ideologically framed scheme. Parra's figurative and activist praxis ran counter to the politically weighted bias of the institutions that could have supported it. In this sense, her art occupies an important place in the global counter-culture of the 1960s and I position it alongside the work of other artists who were working in similar ways and with similar materials. 1959 is remembered in Latin American studies as the year of the Cuban Revolution, but in the arts in Europe it was also the year that witnessed the birth of Pop Art. Collage became fashionable in the early 1960s when Parra was working in papier-mâché. Her Louvre exhibition was in 1964, the year that Rauschenberg won the prize at the Venice Biennale. Rauschenberg's combination of magazine fragments and scraps of material, like Duchamp's meta-art, offered a reflexive parodic commentary on the category of the discarded. Similarly, Parra's incorporation of found materials and an anti-art aesthetic was at the forefront of artistic movements which employed Neo-Dadaist styles to protest against art, civilisation, war and the materialism of mass media culture.

⁴⁷ Berghaus, 'Happenings in Europe', 159.

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